



News Release

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Overdose deaths from prescription pain meds level off in WA

OLYMPIA — Recent data compiled show no change in the number of overdose deaths involving prescription pain medication in Washington between 2012 and 2013.

After an eight-fold increase the prior decade, the overdose rate in Washington has declined by 29 percent between 2008 and 2013. The decline in deaths due to a prescription-drug overdose seems to be leveling off – there were 381 of these deaths reported in 2013 which is down by seven from 2012.

The number of heroin overdose deaths also remained basically the same – down to 227 in 2013 from 231 in 2012.

Most prescription pain medications contain drugs known as opiates or opioids. These powerful drugs are potentially addictive. Prescriptions written for these medications have increased dramatically since the late 1990s as has the number of patients misusing and abusing them. Some who became addicted to prescription opioids have transitioned to heroin, because it's cheaper and more readily available, especially in non-urban areas.

The Department of Health is working to ensure the safe use of pain medications while preventing addictions. To be successful in this goal the agency has developed prevention practices in the past several years to help decrease the number of prescription pain medicine deaths. These practices include setting pain management rules for health care providers and establishing the Prescription Monitoring Program which helps providers see what medications patients are getting.

The Prescription Monitoring Program is a secure online database that allows prescribers to see all prescriptions for controlled substances that their patients are receiving. Health care providers can look for duplicate prescriptions, potential misuse, drug interactions, and other concerns.

Pain management rules for health care professionals who prescribe pain medication include guidance for using opioid-based medications to manage chronic, non-cancer pain. These rules encourage practitioners to become better educated for safe and effective use of these drugs.

Among prevention strategies, the state health department is working on expanded access to naloxone. Naloxone is a powerful opioid overdose antidote that [health care professionals can prescribe](#) for those at risk of an overdose. In September, 2014 the use of naloxone by Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) was approved if the County Medical Program Director where they work allows its use. Patient care protocols for the use of naloxone by EMTs have to be in place and the EMTs need to be trained on its use.

It is important that patients who are prescribed opioid pain medications always follow the label directions and consult with their doctor or pharmacist if they have questions or concerns. Taking these powerful drugs with alcohol, other prescription or illegal drugs can be dangerous and possibly deadly. If you are concerned about overdose prevention, discuss with your health care professional whether a prescription for naloxone is appropriate.

Other important reminders regarding pain medications are to keep them in a secure place and don't share them with others. Sharing prescribed pain meds with someone else is against the law.

Properly dispose of unused or expired prescription medications. Several [drug take-back-your-meds programs](#) exist across the state, including several pharmacies, police and fire departments and [other locations are easy to find](#) in many communities.

The [Department of Health website](#) (doh.wa.gov) is your source for *a healthy dose of information*. Also, [find us on Facebook](#) and [follow us on Twitter](#).

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